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Continue to build market for local farm products

By Marion Kalb

As the director of the National Farm to School Program, I've had the privilege of visiting Kentucky and observing firsthand the state's nationally recognized support for local foods programs.

Since the creation of the Agricultural Development Fund in 2000, steadily increasing markets and profits for homegrown products are transforming Kentucky's food and farm economy. These marketing approaches, which include farmers markets and agritourism ventures, have been key in providing markets for farmers transitioning from tobacco.

In acknowledgement of the success of these new markets, Kentucky developed the State Parks Kentucky Proud program, using local food products in park restaurants and setting a new national standard for incorporating farm items into institutional menus.

This unique program was featured on the nationally syndicated NPR program *The Splendid Table* and elsewhere.

The program has the potential to provide additional marketing opportunities for farmers. The Community Farm Alliance is developing a farm-to-school pilot project, which would begin operation in the fall.

This strategic planning would provide farmers with year-round institutional markets. Incorporating Kentucky products into state park restaurants during the summer months is the perfect precursor to selling farm products in schools, beginning in the fall. Farm-to-school programs are thriving in Northeast and Midwest states and have the potential to operate year-round in Kentucky.

Selling locally grown products to schools is advantageous to farmers, providing a steady, reliable market, often ordering in large volumes. And schools provide the perfect venue to educate Kentucky children about farming.

Connecting what's learned in the classroom to what is consumed in the cafeteria can have a significant effect in positively influencing children's eating habits.

The termination of Bob Perry as the state parks' food service director raised the question of whether the State Parks Kentucky Proud Program will continue. This sudden action represented a step backward and raised the question of whether the state is truly committed to assisting farmers by helping them find alternative markets.

The state has provided solid proof -- the State Parks Kentucky Proud Program and the Agricultural Development Fund -- that it backs small farmers. Further proof is the recent hiring of a direct-marketing specialist for produce in the state Department of Agriculture to focus on bringing Kentucky-grown products into Kentucky institutions. Another way the state can show its commitment to farmers is requiring state agencies to buy local food when they can and to report these purchases once a year.

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